

# An Interview with Thomas Durham



Brigham Young University

Professor, Administrator, School of Music, 1978–2015

Executive Director, Barlow Endowment for Music Composition, 1999–2015

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## Schooling and Career

I went to the University of Utah from 1968 until I left for my mission in 1969. I got back in 1971 and finished up with my bachelor's in music theory in 1974. Then in 1975, I finished up with a master's degree in music theory. Then I went to the University of Iowa from 1975–1978, where I got my PhD in composition—which is kind of unusual, because most composers now get a DMA, a Doctor of Musical Arts. But I liked my PhD; it was more of a liberal arts philosophy-type degree, but it was every bit as rigorous.

In 1978, when I graduated, I was very worried about “Where am I going to get a job?” Because it's tough out there, especially back then. I remember taking the civil service test, thinking, *Maybe I'll be a mailman—I don't know, but I've got to figure out something.* Then just weeks before I got my diploma at the University of Iowa, my composition professor got a call from Marvin Lamb at the University of Texas at San Antonio, about a brand-new music department. He knew Doctor Herwig, my composition teacher, because he had been at Iowa too, and he said, “Who've you got for me that we could hire down here?” My composition teacher mentioned me! I don't know why, because I wasn't the best composer as a student, but for whatever reason, he mentioned me. So Marvin Lamb called me up and said, “I'll meet you in Chicago at the airport.” He interviewed me there—a pretty cheap way to do that—and offered me a position. If there's one thing a mission teaches you, it's how to be interviewed, and so I was very comfortable in that interview—*Yeah, I can do this.* But I was shocked to be offered that position, and I verbally, but not in writing, accepted. Because I was jazzed—I really was.

Within days of me verbally accepting, I get a call from Hal Goodman, the chairman of the department at BYU, saying, “We want to talk to you about coming out here and working.” These were in the old days—I don't think I could get hired here now. But I didn't even want to talk to BYU, because my dad had been a dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Utah, and I was a University of Utah person—two degrees from the U—and I thought, *Well, okay.* I called my dad and asked him, “What do you think I should do?” He said, “Oh, always keep your options open.”

“Yeah, but you know its BYU.”

“I know, I know.”

Even when I was small, I would fill out my tithing slips “Not to go to BYU.” So it's pretty ironic that I ended up here for thirty-seven years.

Anyway, I came out and talked to Hal Goodman, who was then chair, who said, “Why don't you talk to Merrill Bradshaw?” His name still is uttered with great reverence around here—a great Church musician. I just thought, *Gosh, BYU's not that bad of a place.* The money was better than at San Antonio; the position was more secure. The one in San Antonio was a one-year renewable kind of thing—universities do that to protect themselves, and we do it at BYU. But the job at BYU was permanent. It was a tenured position to apply for, and the money was better. Also, I'd been away from home—I'm a Salt Lake boy—for years. So the stars kind of lined up, and I said, “Yeah, I'll take that.” Then I had to tell San Antonio no. But I checked that out with attorneys, who said, “If you haven't got it in writing, you're okay.” They understand that in the profession.

I had never attended school at BYU. I would never have come here as a student—never. In fact, I think the fact that I didn't attend here at all makes me an asset, because so many faculty at BYU, especially in the School of Music, are former students. I walk up and down these halls, and they're my former students. Next door, Claudine Bigelow was a student of mine in a theory class. Mike Hicks was a former TA of mine. Lots of current faculty are former students of mine.

I replaced Art Unsworth (in 1978), who left and ended up becoming an associate dean at the University of Potsdam in New York. Now his son, Andy Unsworth, is a Tabernacle organist, and he's a former student of mine at BYU, one of the best theory students I ever had; now he's an estimable Tabernacle organist. So I replaced Art Unsworth, who was kind of a jazz musician, taught some music theory, and was in charge of what was called The Expanding Musicianship Program, which I then became the head of. It was a disaster, by the way. We changed it.

The Expanding Musicianship Program at BYU back then was part of a national movement to teach music more comprehensively. So instead of teaching lessons over here and then theory here and then history, just teach everything kind of together, in a comprehensive way. There was research that suggested that was the best way to teach music, but after three or four years of trial, it failed everywhere. So everybody kind of went back to the standard conservative way of teaching music theory and history and ensembles and performance, which we've been doing since Mendelssohn, so it just worked out better. I was actually happy to have a change, because we weren't putting out the best product that we could.

## Contemporary Faculty Members

Who were my contemporary faculty members? Well, Merrill Bradshaw, for one. When I met with Merrill—because Hal Goodman sent me down to his office just to see if Merrill might entice me to come to BYU—we had a good chat. I don't think he knew I was coming down to talk to him, so I think he was kind of surprised. He kind of looked at me like, "What are you doing here?"

I told him, "Well, Hal Goodman wanted me to talk to you about working here."

"He did? I don't know anything about that," he replied.

But we had a nice chat and got along really well. Merrill was very frank with me, honest and open about the struggles some artists have with teaching at a church-owned university. He told me about some experiences he had had that were unpleasant, and he could get red in the face when talking about some of those things, but I'm not your source. I'm sure Merrill has somewhere in his history pontificated about that.

Others: the Laycocks—Ralph and Harold, were brothers. Ralph was a long-time orchestra director and also a clarinet player. His brother Harold was a violist, but he taught music theory, so I got along with both of them very well. Years later, I ended up buying Harold Laycock's Canadian violin, because my daughter wanted to learn the violin. Ralph Woodward was the choral conductor, who preceded Ron Staheli, and was here for a long time, just like Staheli has been. You can see that the choral kingdoms that have been established at BYU are world-renowned. I've had very good relationships with the choral area, because I ended up singing in the Tabernacle Choir for twenty-two years.

I remember early in my career, Ralph Woodward choosing to sing one of my arrangements of a Christmas Carol, and I was thrilled, because I had known him by reputation when I was at the University of Utah as a student. I was a singer at the University of Utah, but the choirs at BYU were well known to us and we had some exchanges. So Ralph Woodward was kind of a god-like figure on a pedestal, and to have him select something that I had written was gratifying, and he was sensitive and imaginative with the piece: "Whence is that Goodly Fragrance?" He did things with it that I would never have dreamed of, and I certainly didn't even write, and that's the way a music score works; it's like a script, and the actor can do so many things with it. That's what a good conductor, can do. He was of that magnitude. He was that good.

Quentin Nordgren was—these were just old timers when I was here—a music theory teacher who co-wrote a theory text that we're using now in some of the classes, even though it's out of print. We've just photocopied these works. He co-wrote that with Harold Laycock, who I just mentioned. It's a really good first-year theory text, but for some reason, it didn't catch on nationally. I think it's called *First Year Music Theory*, or something like that.

Also Daryl Stubbs—I'm mentioning the people I knew on my floor, because I've always been on that floor. Daryl Stubbs, an oboist that taught music theory, was a Renaissance man; he could do all sorts of things. Not only could he teach music theory, but he could teach the second year of music theory, which puts him in a class by himself as a theory teacher who wasn't hired as a theory teacher. He played the oboe with the Utah Symphony early in his career. So Daryl was somebody memorable.

Then David Dalton—he's still alive, knocking around here in Provo. He's a distinguished violist, and an author, who established the William Primrose archive in the Harold B. Lee Library. For some reason, we've always gotten along. We connected chemically, and he loved to make fun of me and Durham, because—Bull Durham is a tobacco, and so he gave me a Bull Durham Tobacco

poster. In fact, he actually gave me a pouch of tobacco, from which you roll your own. So this is my prize from David Dalton. His wife Donna and I sang in the Tabernacle Choir, and whenever we would tour, David would come with us as a spouse, so we'd chum it up wherever we were in Europe.

Then Robert Manookin, who was a composer and has hymns in the hymnbook (so does Merrill Bradshaw), was a very kind and nice person to me, avuncular-like. After he retired, he didn't quite know what to do with himself, so he went on missions until he finally passed away. He just kept going on missions. Those are some of the people I remember.

## **Administrators**

The dean when I arrived at BYU was Lael Woodbury (I think he's still living), a theatre person and a natty dresser—just a classy, debonair kind of guy. I remember he invited Ron Staheli, me and Doug Bush over to his house for dinner, because we were hired at the same time, the three of us. It was a great dinner, and his wife was very kind (I don't know if deans do that anymore). So that was something. After Lael Woodbury, the dean was Jim Mason, who just recently passed away. Jim was a musician; his specialty was music education. But when he was made dean, he decided to build an art museum at BYU, and so it's because of Jim Mason that the art museum was built—Jim and Gordon B. Hinckley.

After Jim Mason, Bruce Christensen became the dean, and Bruce was unusual in that he was not a professor; he didn't come from academia, he came from Bonneville International. Although before that, he was president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, so a very distinguished member of public television. He had the whole corporate thing going on, and I think he kind of had a rough ride here, but I got along well with him. I think some faculty are really hard on non-academics. He lasted for a little while and then left.

After Bruce Christensen, Newell Dayley was the dean. He's still a good friend, and is still at UVU as a dean; he's a very capable administrator. He came from the School of Music as well, though at that time it was the Department of Music, and he was the chair.

After Newell Dayley came Steve Jones. So we've had a lot of Steve Jones. We're in the twelfth year of Steve Jones, and Steve was also a student of mine. So those are the deans.

The chairs of the School of Music: I've talked about Hal Goodman, talked about Jim Mason, who then went to be the dean. After Jim Mason, it was, I think, Newell Dayley, who also went to be the dean; and then Clyn Barrus, who had a brain tumor and passed away kind of suddenly. After that it was David Randall, followed by Dale Monson and then—I'm surprised I can remember all of this—by Kory Katseanes. So there you go.

## **Curriculum and Classes Taught**

I've taught pretty much the full range of theory curriculum, and early on in my career I taught composition. After you've been at BYU for a while, sometimes your assignment changes and evolves, and I ended up being an administrator—the associate director of the school and associate chair of the department—pretty much my whole career. I had a load assignment that included that. The rest of my load, after I did a little bit of composition for a few years, was mostly music theory: first year, second year, counterpoint—strict counterpoint, not free counterpoint. I've never taught free counterpoint, though I could. I think I'm one of the few people in the state of Utah that teaches strict counterpoint. I also authored the ear-training text *Beginning Tonal Dictation*, which we've been using here for maybe fifteen or sixteen years. There's another one, *Advanced Tonal Dictation*, which we use in the second year. That's been a blessing to have. It's been picked up by maybe sixty other universities and colleges, so it's been a success—not a huge financial success, but it's got my name known around the country for those who use it.

## **Changes within the College**

I've talked about the Expanding Musicianship Program; one of the biggest changes made, was teaching music theory and ear training, which we now call dictation, separately. Even though they're really intermingling in the curriculum, we want our theory students to know how to see with their

ears and hear with their eyes. What had happened was that there were students that were A theory students and failures as dictation students, or the reverse, so we'd have to come up with some kind of grade for them—are they a C or a B? We thought, *No, let's separate those two things out so that we can grade them separately. Then we can really hold their feet to the fire with dictation and ear training.* That's why my book came about. We also separated out keyboard harmony and sight singing; we really went with an atomistic deconstruction of musicianship, and I think it's been pretty successful. That's how it is now at BYU, and that's the way it is at the best schools around the country.

The college has been in the Harris Fine Arts Center way too long. The building was built in 1964 when Crawford Gates was the chair of the department. He was a good friend of my dad's up at the University of Utah. I remember as a fourteen-year-old going down to BYU and seeing the brand new building. I was awestruck with the facilities—and one would have been awestruck back in 1964, but here in 2014, fifty years later, we're not so awestruck. We need a new building. From what I understand, when the plans for this building were drawn up and submitted to the Church for approval, it was too expensive.

The Church said, "That's a nice building, but shrink it by ten percent, and then we can afford it."

So the architects went and—shrink. That's why we ended up with weird spaces around the building, like in the foyers on the fourth floor; we have to teach classes in these odd spaces. We do need a new building, but the museum went up. That was our hope.

## Music Technology

Composition is like a technology. It's always advancing, and there are always new techniques and ideas. Rather than have me try and summarize those, you would have to wait for fifty years before you could see what really happened; come get me in fifty years. I will say that for composers, music-writing programs and computer programs have revolutionized the printing and the scoring of music.

I remember as a teenager fantasizing, *I wonder if you could ever go to a keyboard and play something on the keyboard and then have it print out.*

That is what we're doing now, but that was just a fantasy back then. As a student, I had to write up all my scores with ink, onionskins, and a T-square, and make it look beautiful. Now it's all done on a computer. You have to be careful because the score looks beautiful, and you think, *Oh, this is great music.* Now you have to look past the beauty of the score and really get into the composition itself.

Finale is the Cadillac of all programs, but there are other worthy programs. There's Sibelius, there's Lime, and I think two or three others. The thing is, students come already knowing this stuff, so we don't even have to teach them. They come already up to speed and inclined towards technology; this is what they want to do. You don't have to drag them kicking and screaming into something new—it's some of the faculty you have to do that with. I'd say that is one of the biggest changes that occurred in my career technology-wise.

Computer technology has also really revolutionized instruction. With it, I could teach Foreman Analysis using PowerPoint, and I could use features of Finale on PowerPoint. Instead of just dropping a needle on a disk and having my students listen to it, with computers you can set up a score so they can follow it and listen to it. You can stop it and highlight things; we've had an enhancement of what we can do by way of instruction, just because of all of the gains in technology.

## Research and Creative Work

My research and creative work reflected what I was doing in the school. I'm chiefly a choral composer, and so all of these things are publications of mine. These are choral scores that are read by choirs. While I was in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, it premiered maybe fifteen of my pieces. It was nice to be in the choir and have that experience—getting a nice organization like that to sing your work that goes around the world. Not too bad.

I have a hymn in the hymnbook: page 171, "With Humble Heart." I'm a fourth generation Mormon hymnist. My great-grandfather, Thomas Durham, a Mormon handcart pioneer, wrote

hymns that are in older hymnbooks. My grandfather had four hymns in the 1927 hymnal. My father has two hymns in our current hymnal. My uncle has one, my great uncle has four or five, and there are more Durhams in LDS hymnbooks than any other family by far. We're four generations of Mormon hymn composers, but I'm the caboose; my son is not a hymn writer.

My creative work has been in publishing choral music, but I've also published textbooks for instruction, and I've got your usual assortment of articles and scholarly works that talk about harmonic dictation. Online I have about twenty articles that are published electronically about various music theory materials and textbooks and resources because I was, for twelve years, a question leader for advanced placement (AP). I would lead rooms full of readers and take them through the AP music theory test. I did that for twelve years and built up a nice network of connections and people. It was great because I was with people who understood everything I go through.

If I were to say, "I can't get my students to double the third of the borrowed submediant when moving from the dominant to the sixth chord," most people don't even know what I'm talking about.

When I said that to anybody back there, before I even finished the sentence, he'd say, "I know! I hate it when they don't do that! What's wrong with them? Why can't they do it?"

Or he'd say, "What do you do about that augmented second moving from the four to five in minor key?"

We've all got opinions and we all understand each other; it's like being among like-minded people. It's a relief to not have to lay all the groundwork out to try to explain yourself. I had twelve years of that, and it was very satisfying professionally to do that. You're working really hard but you're seeing progress, and you're doing good work and rewarding students for their good work. I did that from 1996 or '97 to 2008.

Then for the past fourteen or fifteen years, I've been the executive director of the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition at Brigham Young University, which is a hidden treasure. I don't think the Mormon community knows how much brand-new music is commissioned from Brigham Young University: really experimental, weird sounding things to many—these aren't hymns we're talking about. It's very cutting edge music, and BYU is in the vanguard of this because of the Barlow Endowment.

That came about because of a million dollar gift from Milton R. Barlow back in 1982 or '83. My predecessor as executive director was Merrill Bradshaw, who was the first executive director. I was the second, and I have longevity there. I'll be stepping down, and my replacement will be Ethan Wickman, who happens to be a relative and a former student of mine at BYU. He's also got a position at the University of Texas at San Antonio—remember back when I said that was my first interview? It's just weird.

Do you know the theory of six degrees of separation? It's that between any two people on the planet, there are six relationships. She knows him, and he knows her because she's a second cousin, she knows his uncle, and that was his girlfriend. You go through six people and you can connect to any person on the planet. I think in Mormondom it's two degrees. I really do, I'm serious. Everybody knows everybody.

## **Former Students**

Do I recall names of my students who have graduated and now continue to work in the field? All the people in the Harris Fine Arts Center! There's Claudine Bigelow next door, and there's most of the theory faculty. There's Michael Hicks, who is the leading intellect in the School of Music, and an old-timer now—he was maybe my first TA. He's a published author of American music historical interest.

Christian Asplund, just down the way, was a student of mine, and Neil Thornock was a student of mine. Steve Ricks was a student. Brian Harker, music historian, was a former student of mine. Christian Smith, our bassoonist, was a student of mine.

I've talked to you about the tabernacle organist, Andy Unsworth. Ryan Murphy, who is the associate conductor of the tabernacle choir, was in my theory class. All these people are Durham-trained; all of these people can talk to you about that. I guess there's a good measure there.

## **Retirement**

I will retire August 31, 2015. Why are so many faculty members secretive about their retirement plans? There are some people who just don't want to talk about it; they do not want to tell you when. I've known for a long time—August 31, 2015. I would have retired three years earlier, at age 62, were it not for the great recession, which knocked out a lot of my savings so I had to work three more years.

I am going to London in January as BYU's director of London Study Abroad for six months. That's how I'll be closing things out, winter semester and spring term. That's what I plan on doing then. After that there'll be some golf and there'll be some composition—who knows—I'll write my memoirs, I don't know.

## **Feelings About BYU**

As a University of Utah person, I've tried to stay as secular as I can at BYU, because there's already enough of the spiritual stuff going on; so many of our faculty meetings are like Sunday School. I've always had a healthy mistrust of the Sunday School stuff that goes on. I've always been like that; I've always been very secular. But I've been able to survive that because it has been a blessing to be able to go into a classroom and talk to my students about Laban if it relates to music theory—and it does. I could never have done that at the University of Iowa; I probably would have been sued.

The students—I can get emotional about the great students I've had, and the classes. I'm starting to puddle up. Stop, wait a minute, we'll do Lamaze. Okay, I'm good. My students, I just don't deserve them. They're so great in every respect, not just spiritually, but musically. I like every one of them. That is my refuge, the classroom. So much of music administration and university administration is just a sewer, just the garbage you have to put up with, and I go into that theory classroom and it's just such relief. I think of these students as my equals, because they can play better than I can, and they're so quick and fast and just wonderful. And to see the changes, to see their eyes light up from a musical principal—I can get excited about a scale or an interval or a rhythm, I can. That's been great; I'll probably miss that, but I'm not going to get too nostalgic. I've done this for thirty-seven years, and you want to do it for the rest of your life. I've had such great students and the classroom. I think I picked that up from my dad who was my music theory teacher; that's a natural role model for anybody, their dad. My second role model was my mission president, Paul Dunn—two strong pillars in my life. I saw my dad teach music theory, and seeing him have such a good time, I thought, *I think I'll do that*. I started out as a math major at the University of Utah, but music theory and math, well, there's a connection there, and I ended up following his footsteps. He went to the University of Iowa; I went to the University of Iowa. But I ended up at BYU, his arch rival enemy.

I served my mission in New England. I ended up serving in the mission office in Boston for over a year. Boston is where I served my mission, that's where my dad was born, it's where my grandfather went to music school, it's where my great-grandfather emigrated from Lancashire England, landing in Boston. Boston and Durhams have a lot in common.

Then my great grandfather took the train from Boston to where it ended in Iowa City, where the University of Iowa is. That's where my great-grandfather built his handcart, and that's where my dad went to school, and I went back. Now there is a Mormon Handcart Park that was developed when I had just graduated with my PhD. There's this line you can draw from Utah all the way back to Iowa City through Boston and back to England where there were Durhams and hymns. There's a lot of history there, and somehow I ended up at BYU.